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The Dynamic of Women Leading Women in Higher Education

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Abstract

With each passing decade, women make significant strides in their educational attainment, better positioning themselves for leadership roles. Despite decades of research assessing the leadership styles of women, the established picture of women and leadership is mixed. On one hand, women are praised for possessing many of the leadership skills, behaviors and attributes associated with effective leadership. Yet, on the other hand, women tend to deny support to one another. Twenty women with various years and levels of leadership experience in higher education were interviewed to explore how they describe their experiences leading women and being led by women. Initially I planned to utilize Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth of leadership as the theoretical framework. However, analysis and interpretation of the data was more precisely aligned with Kouzes and Posner's (2007) paradigm: the leadership challenge. Results of the study revealed women who successfully lead other women, influence those they lead through a willingness to strengthen and challenge, pull them forward, and continuously improve.

Introduction

Women comprise nearly 50% of the U.S. workforce. Since 1982 women have earned more bachelor's degrees, since 1987 more master's degrees, and since 2006 more doctoral degrees than their male counterparts (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although significant gains have been made, women in higher education still lag far behind their male counterpart when it comes to attaining leadership positions. Despite decades of research assessing the leadership styles of women, the established picture of women and leadership is mixed. On one hand, women are praised for possessing many of the leadership skills, behaviors and attributes associated with effective leadership (Eagly, 2007). Yet, on the other hand, women tend to deny support to one another (Kaiser and Spalding, 2015; Sheppard and Aquino, 2014; Mavin, Grandy, and Williams, 2014; Duiguid, 2011; Elsesser, 2011; Parks-Stamm, Heilman and Hearns, 2008; Carbado and Gulati, 2004; Broder, 1993).

Background of the Study

Women in Higher Education

Current Leadership. Women in the United States are attending college and earning advanced degrees at unprecedented rates (Lennon, 2013). The increase, according to Lennon (2013), "can be attributed to more women of color attending college than their male counterparts" and the notion that "women typically cannot earn as much as men without a college degree, causing more women to pursue higher education to increase their earning power" (p. 13). Although women are attaining advanced degrees at unprecedented rates, the increase has not translated into increased positions of leadership in higher education (see table 1).

Table 1 Comparison of Women and Men Positional Leaders at Doctoral-granting institutions.

Position	Women	Men
Full Professor	8%	27.4%
Board of Trustee	28.4%	71.6%
President	22%	78%
Chief Academic Officer	32%	68%

(AAUP, 2015)

Degrees. The percent of women completing college and graduate school has significantly increased over the decades. In 1969-70 women received 43% of the undergraduate degrees (associate and bachelor's), 40% of the master's degrees, 5% of the professional degrees, and 13% of the doctoral degrees. Fast forward to 2009-10, women received 62% of the associate degrees, 57% of the bachelor's degrees, 60% of master's degrees and 52% of doctoral and professional degrees (NCES 2011, p. 289).

Faculty. Women account for 43% of full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions (Lennon, 2013). Although the percent of women assuming full-time faculty positions has risen substantially during the past 25 years, Lennon (2013) points out, "women are still underrepresented among the more prestigious faculty ranks" as shown in table 2 (p. 14).

Table 2 Distribution of Faculty by Rank, Gender and Institution Type 2014-2015 (Percent)

Academic Rank	Men Doctoral-granting Institution	Women Doctoral-granting Institution	Men Master's-granting Institution	Women Master's-granting Institution
Professor	25.6	8.5	18.0	9.8
Associate	15.5	11.0	15.1	13.3
Assistant	11.5	10.3	12.3	14.5
Instructor	2.1	3.0	2.4	4.3
Lecturer	4.2	5.2	3.7	4.8
Total	60.4	39.6	52.3	47.7

(AAUP , 2015)

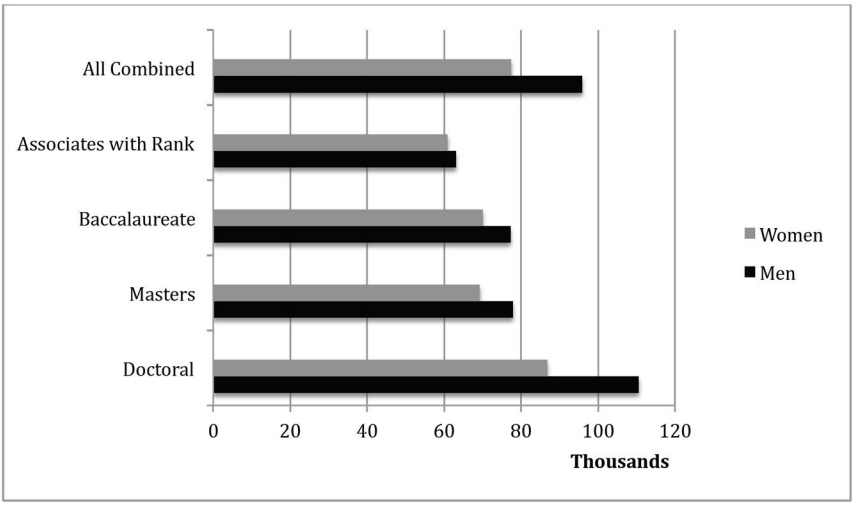


Figure 1. Salary Comparison. This figure illustrates the salaries of men and women employed at Doctorate-granting institutions (AAUP, 2015, p. 24).

Faculty Salary. The ratio of female faculty earnings compared to male faculty earnings has remained "virtually unchanged since the 1980s" (Lennon, 2013, p. 16). Women at public and private 4-year institutions make about 20% less than men (NCES, 2011). The largest discrepancy in pay occurs at Doctorate-granting institutions, with the least at associate-degree granting institutions as shown in figure 1 (NCES, 2011).

College and University Presidents. From 2006 to 2011, women attaining the presidency increased from 23% to 26.4% (Cook 2012, p. 1). Total number of women presidents has remained constant during the past five years at about 500 (Lennon, 2013).

Boards of Trustees. Among boards of trustees, women are still a "distinct minority" (Lennon, 2013, p. 23). According to the Association of Governing Boards, the percentage of women on Boards of Trustees has "steadily declined" since 1997 (p. 23). Although women's representation on private boards has increased 1.8% since 2004, men outnumber women two to one (2013).

Literature Review

Leadership Advantage

The female leadership advantage is pervasive in leadership literature. Earlier research by Rosener (1990) found female leaders to be less hierarchical, encouraging participation by "sharing power and information" which in turn enhances "people's self worth," and "gets them excited about their work" (p. 120). More likely to characterize themselves in terms of "transformational" leadership, female leaders tend to "ascribe their power" to characteristics such as charisma, interpersonal skills, and hard work rather than to organizational title or position (Rosener, 1990, p. 120).

Contemporary research has determined that female leaders are more transformational than male leaders (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen, 2003; Lopez-Zafra, Garcia- Retamero, and Martos, 2012). Eagly and Johnson (1990) revealed that female leaders tend to adopt a "more democratic and participative and a less autocratic or directive style than their male counterparts" (p. 233). Women are concerned primarily "with the welfare of other people," and have a penchant for communal behaviors, such as affection, kindness, gentleness, and nurturing tendencies (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 783). They are "accustomed" to "monitoring emotional cues" (Helgesen, 2010, p. 41). The ability to anticipate needs, has helped female leaders "inspire" their followers, "mentoring and empowering" them to "develop to their full potential" (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen, 2003, p. 570). The transformational approach to leadership has been deemed the most effective style of leadership for organizations (Conger and Hunt, 1999; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Hunt, 1999; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Lopez-Zafra, Garcia-Retamero, and Martos, 2012; Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivsubramaniam, 1996). In stark contrast to the conventional way of leading through rewards and punishment (Avolio and Bass, 2002), the command and control style of leadership (commonly associated with men) no longer holds, rather "Good leadership is increasingly defined in terms of the qualities of a good coach or teacher rather than a highly authoritative person who merely tells others what to do" (Eagly, 2007, p. 3).

Micro Aggressive Behavior

Although research has established women as having a communal, participative and empowering style of leadership, literature also demonstrates women deny support to one another. Management literature dating to the early 1970s began investigating the tendency of women in senior leadership positions to hinder the progress of other women (Sheppard and Aquino, 2014). Staines, Tavris and Jayaratne (1974) introduced the concept of the *queen bee syndrome,* referring to women who achieve success in male-dominated domains as likely to oppose the success of other women. Since the inception of this concept, the queen bee syndrome has been heavily documented (Johnson and Gurung, 2011; Johnson and Mathur-Helm, 2011; Baumgartner and Schneider, 2010; Hersby, Ryan and Jetten, 2009; Ellemers, van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, and Bonvini, 2004; Cooper, 1997). Consider the words of Bickel (2014), "in virtually every forum in which I've been asked to speak on a gender-related subject over the past 25 years (about 100 academic health centers and 20 professional societies), I am asked some version of "Why do women treat each other so badly?" (p. 365).

One would assume that women, largely underrepresented in many domains and leadership positions, would advocate on behalf of other women (Critcher and Risen, 2014; Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, and O'Brian, 2009). However, research literature indicates this is not the case. Carbado and Gulati (2004) explored whether the least represented in an organization "lift as they climb" (p. 1647). They discovered that members of the least represented groups, such as women and minorities, tend to value self-promotion over group advancement, to the point of hindering the advancement of other women and minorities (Carbado and Gulati, 2004). Many refer to this phenomenon as "climbing and kicking" (Kaiser and Spalding, 2015, p. 600).

Kaiser and Spalding (2015) examined whether or not underrepresentation in a group leads women to "climb and kick" or "climb and lift" (p. 601). They found that when women are in domains in which they are underrepresented, they "not only bypass opportunities to offer support…but actually impede the advancement of women who attempt to follow them up the ladder" (p. 606). Interestingly, "women's gender identification" was directly tied to whether they "stalled or accelerated the advancement

of other ingroup members" (p. 603). Women who "weakly identified" with their gender group hindered the advancement of other women, while women who "strongly identified" promoted their advancement (p. 606).

Mavin, Grandy, and Williams (2014) refer to the tendency of women to impede the advancement of other women as "intra-gender micro-aggression" (p. 439). Subtle, denigrating putdowns, often invisible and unconscious, intra-gender micro-aggression is "so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous" (Sue, 2010, p. xvi-xvii). To control the balance of power, women engage in psychological and non-physical behavior that seeks to sabotage, manipulate and undermine other women (Mavin, Grandy, and Williams, 2014). In an effort to distance themselves, women will "hesitate" to promote junior women or "support policies that help women advance," opting instead to "emphasize the ways in which they differ from other women" (Elsesser, 2011, p.167). Examples include, but are not limited to, (a) refusal to mentor, (b) favoring male employees, and (c) seeking out ways to distance oneself from other women (Kaiser and Spalding, 2015). The following examples further illustrate these points.

Parks-Stamm, Heilman and Hearns (2008) examined whether or not females penalize women who succeed in male-gendered jobs to "salvage their own self-views regarding competence" (p. 237). The study found that women view successful women as a "threat to the self" (p. 242). "Penalizing" successful women served "as a self-protective strategy for females faced with a threatening upward comparison to a successful female target" (p. 242). In an effort to "invalidate the potential threat" and "salvage their self-views," women "cast" the successful female as "noncommunal" and "unlikeable" thereby "protecting" their "self-evaluation in the face of a threatening comparison" and "averting the effects of upward social comparison" (p. 239-242). It was also revealed that only when the successful female target "was made less threatening to participants' self-views of competence" (i.e. the participants received positive feedback about their potential from the female target) did the penalizing effect disappear (p. 245).

Interested in whether or not females exhibit negative or downward bias toward one another, Broder (1993) analyzed all grant proposals submitted to the Economics Program at NSF between 1987-1990. Proposal

data contained the name, gender, institution, department, and year of Ph.D. of the principal investigator (1993). Scores of each review ranging from 1 (excellent) to 5 (poor) were recorded (1993). A separate reviewer database contained the name, affiliation and gender of the individuals who reviewed the proposal (1993). Broder (1993) matched the proposal and reviewer data sets for the analysis. Of the 1,479 usable proposals in the database, 9.3 had a female principal investigator and received 6,764 reviews, with 7.7 coming from female reviewers (1993). Broder (1993) indicated two results stood out. First, "both male and female reviewers are harsher on proposals with a female principal investigator than on proposals with a male principal investigator" (p. 965). Second, female reviewers gave "significantly worse scores to female proposers" than male reviewers, whereas male proposers received "the same treatment from male and female proposers" (p. 965). The female reviewers, Broder (1993) found, were "less likely than men" to give a female principal investigator a rating of excellent (p. 965).

Duguid (2011) researched whether or not "women will abdicate the opportunity to support highly or moderately qualified female candidates as potential work group peers" (p. 104). The study found that the numerical representation of women in the group and the "prestige" of the work group played a role in "their willingness to support" other women entering the group (p. 112). When women are the only female represented in a work-group or team, and are subsequently asked to vote for another person to join the group, the "token" female is far more likely to vote for a male to join the group than a female (Duguid, 2011, p. 9). When women are the majority in a work-group or team, and are subsequently asked to vote for another person to join the group, the female majority is far more likely to vote in favor of a female candidate joining the group (2011). Furthermore, "the qualifications of the female candidate shaped the nature of the threat that emerged" (p. 112). Female tokens in "high prestige" work groups expressed concern that the more highly qualified the female candidate, the greater the chances were that the group members would view the female candidate "more favorably," increasing the feelings of competitive threat (p. 112). Concern was also expressed that "marginally qualified" female candidates may perform poorly, thus negatively impacting how women in the group were viewed as a collective whole, increasing the collective threat (2011, p. 112).

Methods

The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic of women leading women by exploring how women in higher education describe their experiences leading women and being led by women. Utilizing a narrative inquiry, contextualized accounts were obtained from one-hour, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews.

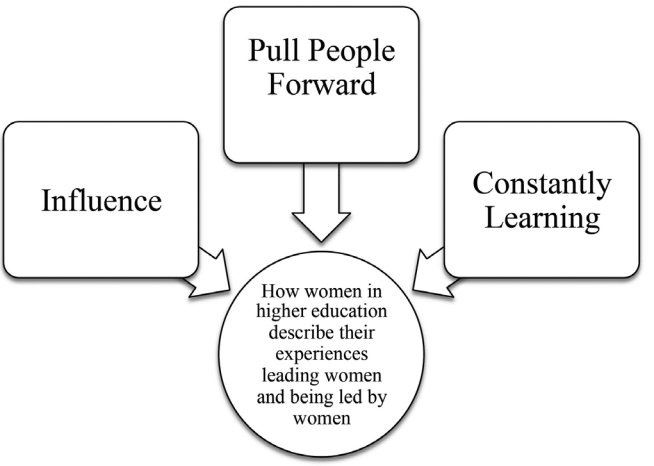
Participants

Twenty women, who hold positions of leadership at institutions of higher education, were interviewed for the study. Participants were employed at either: (a) public tier I, (b) private nonprofit, or (c) community colleges. Leadership positions held included: (a) President, (b) Vice President, (c) Vice Chancellor, (d) Dean, (e) Associate Dean, (f) Department Chair, and (g) Director.

Of the 20 participants, thirteen held doctorate degrees, six held master's degrees, and one held a bachelor's degrees. Years of experience in higher education ranged from five years to thirty-nine years. Of the participants, 16 (80%) were employed at public institutions, while the remaining 4 (20%) were employed at private institutions.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed three themes: (a) Influence, (b) Pull People Forward, and (c) Constantly Learning.



Influence

All twenty participants indicated there had been at least one woman that was pivotal in their academic or professional career. Mentioned most frequently were supervisor, colleague, professor and college coach, with one participant mentioning her mother as the sole source of influence. The experiences participants described demonstrated that effective leadership is more than a transaction. It is a reciprocal process that exemplifies the willingness to connect, strengthen and challenge. Prolific in their descriptions and woven throughout their stories was a very prominent message: *leadership is influence*.

Eight participants described a woman who had influenced them on their path to leadership as someone who was willing to connect and share knowledge. Participants used phrases such as, "willing to share," "generous," "wasn't threatened at all," and "open and honest." *Willingness* echoed throughout as a catalyst for influence. Participants indicated that it was the *willingness* of the women of influence to take time to get know them, share knowledge and life experience that paved the way to connecting and relating.

Connect & Share Knowledge

- **"Willing to share"**
- **"Generous"**
- **"Wasn't threated at all"**
- **"Open and honest"**
- ***Willingness* was described *as* a "catalyst for influence" and was demonstrated by:**
  - **"Taking time"**
  - **"Sharing knowledge"**
  - **"Sharing life experience"**

Four participants described a woman who had influenced them on their path to leadership as someone who conveyed confidence in them. Recalling moments of influence participants used phrases such as, "she wanted me to succeed," and "she wanted me to be here." The women of

influence did more than show participants she had confidence in them, she articulated belief in them and their abilities.

Convey Confidence

- **"She wanted me to succeed"**
- **"She wanted me to be here"**
- **"She helped me…"**
- **"She introduced me to people, people in power**
- **Articulated confidence "in me and my abilities"**

Seven participants described a woman who had influenced them on their path to leadership as someone who was willing to stretch and challenge them. Each participant reflected on the "stretch" and "challenge" as a source of encouragement. The notion of being "challenged to think higher" was iterated time and again. Whether it was challenging participants to consider new opportunities, apply for a job, be on a committee, or simply dream bigger, it was the efforts of another woman striving to move them forward that carried the most weight.

Pull People Forward

Hearing participants describe their leadership experiences, it was evident, when women are at their best leading other women, they Pull them Forward. Participants did not describe engaging in one action that pulled women forward, rather, it was a combination of actions that brings out the best in others and helps move them forward. Articulating a collective sense of, "pay it forward," participants described walking "alongside" other women by embracing the responsibility, showing support and offering encouragement. Exemplary leadership begins with a "call to action" to "accept personal responsibility to be a role model for leadership" (Kouzes and Posner, 2007, p. xv). In every interview, participants indicated a sense of responsibility to women following in their footsteps. By setting the example and facilitating opportunities, participants illustrated how they help others in the way they were helped. Placing a heavy emphasis on "doing," participant experiences were filled with examples of purpose, intentionality and action. From "opening a door," to seeking out women to mentor,

participant experiences centered on taking action to help grow and develop others.

Embrace the Responsibility

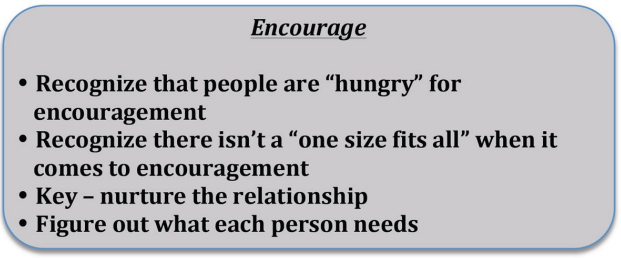
- **Sense of responsibility to women following in their footsteps**
- **Setting the example**
- **Facilitating opportunities**
- **Help others the "way I was helped"**
- **Heavy emphasis on "*doing*"**
- ***Purpose* & *intentionality***
  - **"Opening a door," to seeking out women to mentor**
  - **Experiences centered on taking action to help develop others**

One of the most significant ways participants described pulling people forward, was by showing that they care. Illustrated in a variety of ways, yet echoed throughout, was making sure people have what they need to be successful. Three participants emphasized the importance of being accessible, available and listening, while one participant noted having her "antenna" up in an effort to recognize what is going on below the surface. Five participants mentioned allowing people room to grow and make mistakes. All participants indicated a keen awareness that leadership is a reciprocal process that involves engaging in conversation and asking the right questions. Participants emphasized the value of helping women think the process through. By allowing them the opportunity to "figure it out," they helped pave the way to leadership growth and development.

Show Support

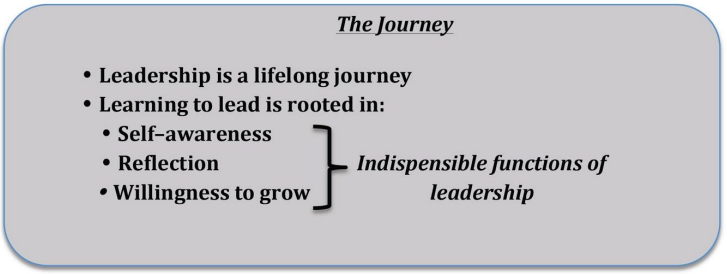
- **Make sure people have what they need to be successful**
- **Be accessible, available, listen**
- **Have your "Antenna up" to see what's going on below the surface**
- **Allow people room to grow, room to make mistakes**
- **Embrace a reciprocal process:**
  - **Engage in conversation**
  - **Ask questions**
  - **Help people think the process thru**

A third component of pulling people forward was encouragement. Most anyone can tell you, "The climb to the top is arduous and steep" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 99). Leaders who embody hope and determination stand a greater chance of achieving long-term success than those who do not (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). By seeking out ways to encourage the heart, effective leaders are able to continue the quest (Kouzes and Posner, 2007). Participant voices echoed Kouzes and Posner, suggesting that people are generally hungry for encouragement, and there "isn't a one size fits all" when it comes to what works best. The key is to figure out what each person needs. While some people may benefit from words of encouragement, some may be encouraged through an opportunity, while others may feel encouraged when they are stretched and challenged to be their best.



Constantly Learning

There is a strong correlation between "engagement in learning and leadership effectiveness" (Kouzes and Posner, 2012, p. 202). Learning, according to Kouzes and Posner, "is the master skill" (p. 202). Iterated throughout participant experiences was the shared sentiment that leadership is an active and continual process, a lifelong journey rooted in self-awareness, reflection and the willingness to grow.



Excelling as a leader depends, in large part, "on how well you know yourself" (Kouzes and Posner, 2012, p. 337). A common thread woven throughout participant descriptions was a sense of self-awareness. Participants indicated a realization of knowing "who I am." For some the realization was rooted in a greater awareness of early life circumstances and the role those played in forming and shaping how they see things. For others the realization evolved throughout their career. A collective sense of intentionality and authenticity was evident. As one participant noted, gaining greater self-awareness is done intentionally by taking a "snapshot" of where you are. Although participants acknowledged they have grown in a variety of ways over the years, several emphasized that the essence of who they are at their core is the same. Many referred to it as leading from the authentic self.

What I know now

- **"I've learned"**
- **"I haven't arrived"**
- **Humility and growth mindset**
- **Keener sense of self**
- **Self-acceptance**
- **Acceptance of others**

Reflecting was common among participants. Many stressed the notion that life's not linear. Rather, situations, environments and needs are constantly changing. Intentionally taking the time to reflect on circumstances, both personal and professional, was viewed as an indispensible function of leadership. Several participants noted that asking oneself questions is pivotal to the reflection process. What's happening? What worked well? What did not? Is there something I can do better? Is there some way I can treat people better? Participants noted that taking the time to reflect illuminates areas of opportunity for growth.

Lastly, participants were quick to point out that leadership is a *learning process* that is *nonstop* and *continual*. A sentiment shared by all was, "I haven't arrived." As participants spoke about their experiences, it became apparent that they collectively view leadership with humility and a growth mindset. They remain open to the idea that they still have much to learn, with several referring to themself as "students of leadership."

Implications for Practice

The findings of the study are consistent with Kouzes and Posner's (2007) leadership paradigm: how leaders mobilize others to want to get extraordinary things done. Women who effectively lead other women *do leadership*.

Implications for Practice

Leadership is about what you *do.*

Leadership is a *relationship.*

Leadership is *continuous improvement*.

Leadership is about what you *do*. Participants made it clear, supporting and growing other women exists in the "doing." By embracing the responsibility and accepting a *call to action* you will foster opportunities to bring out the best in yourself and the women you lead.

Leadership is a *relationship*. Becoming a woman of influence begins with you. Women who effectively lead other women take time to: (a) connect, (b) share knowledge, (c) convey confidence, (d) stretch, (e) support, and (f) encourage.

Leadership is *continuous improvement*. Participants conveyed over and over the idea that leadership is lifelong process of learning, rooted in self-awareness, reflection, and the *willingness* to grow. Liberate the authentic leader within by pursuing learning and leadership with passion and fervor.

Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education

Sponsorship matters. Facilitate opportunities for aspiring women to meet and develop relationships with influential women in positions of structural leadership. Influence happens one moment at a time. Provide opportunities for those "pivotal" moments to occur.

Educate Women about best practices. Review of literature established that the picture of women and leadership is mixed. Although many women possess the "right combination" of leadership behaviors, commonly associated with growing and developing others, many of these same women deny support to one another. Educating women about the factors that influence and affect how women lead and are led will successfully prepare women for the role of leader and that of follower.

Build community. Create opportunities to bring women together, encouraging them to share their stories. When you listen to people talk about their life, their work, and their passions, you develop a different level of respect for them and it helps you see yourself as part of a larger community.

Conclusion

When Jim Kouzes & Barry Posner (2012) began their journey of researching exemplary leadership more than 40 years ago, they "wanted to know what people did when they were at their 'personal best' in leading others" (p. xiii). What they "discovered" and "rediscovered" was that "leadership is not the private reserve of few charismatic men and women," rather, leadership is a process "ordinary people" engage in when they bring out the best in themselves and others (p. xii). The findings of the study connect the voices of the participants to Kouzes and Posner's (2007) leadership framework, revealing leadership is "not about who you are, it's about what you do" (2012, p. 15).

The significance of the study exists in the potential implications for women aspiring to leadership positions within higher education and for institutions of higher education seeking to support and develop women leaders. Understanding the factors that influence and affect how women lead and are led by women will help women successfully prepare for the role of leader and that of follower. Recognizing how the dynamic of women leading women influences organizational culture and leadership will help institutions of higher education develop best practices for developing and supporting female leadership.

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